

NDOR's Randy Peters Lectures with Smithsonian Scholars

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Simply stated, it was an "opportunity of a lifetime." Randy Peters' description of his recent participation in the "Smithsonian Scholars in the Schools" program is not an exaggeration when you consider the facts: The Nebraska Department of Roads' Planning & Project Development Division Engineer was one of three "world-class scholars" selected from the prestigious Smithsonian Institution to share their knowledge and enthusiasm for learning with students, teachers and the school community.

The task at hand: Research, prepare and give a one-hour multi-media presentation on major themes in highway transportation. Another prerequisite was to make it educational, yet interesting, to the primary target audience: 17-year-olds.

Peters noted that Omaha's Durham Museum, an affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, has hosted several Smithsonian scholars in the past four years. This year, a traveling exhibition, "Eyewitness: American Originals from the National Archives," was developed by the National Archives and scheduled for display at the Durham October 4, 2008 through January 4, 2009. The exhibition features first-hand accounts of significant moments in history that changed the U.S., American society and national identity.

In conjunction with the exhibi-

tion, the Durham chose the following three topics for the Scholars in Schools program: (1) student involvement in the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s; (2) the Kennedy assassination and how America might have been transformed if he had lived; and (3) the evolution of transportation. According to Peters, the Durham had already selected prestigious scholars for the first two topics and was

looking for someone with expertise in the third category. They contacted NDOR Director John Craig, who recommended Peters, because of his keen interest in history, past experience with historical presentations and more than 30 years experience in transportation.

Once he was selected, Peters began a long period of research, compiling information and putting together his presentation, from March until November. Besides extensive reading on the subject, he utilized a variety of resources, including primary sources that showcased Nebraska's story. Among the sources were NDOR's archives, the Durham's historical vaults and archives, and the Lincoln Journal Star's archives. Peters noted that help he received from NDOR's Communication Division was indispensable in making his presentation polished and professional. He gave special acknowledgements to Division Manager Mary Jo Oie, Mary Neben, Jack Rosecrans, Jan Havranek, Jim Pester, Clint Mangen and Arvid Olson.

Peters gave his educational presentation, titled "Destiny's Corridor: the Great Platte River Road" from November 11-13. He gave the presentation nine times within three days: once at the Durham, once to civil engineering students at

UNO, twice to construction management students at the Peter Kiewit Institute, three times to classes at Bellevue West High School and twice to students at a middle school in Blair.

Peters said speaking to so many groups in such a short timeframe was intense but rewarding. Other major challenges included condensing a lot of material into a one-hour presentation and making the information



Randy Peters

interesting and accessible for this age group, without reciting a lot of facts and figures.

"The goal was to present it in story form with a main character, which in this case was former President Dwight D. Eisenhower, because he was probably the single most responsible individual for building the

interstate system. We also told the story from the point of view of others involved with the project, including the engineers who built it and those affected by it, including the homeowner in the path of the interstate, but the Eisenhower story was the great overarching theme or story."

Peters said the story was a compelling one that he was eager to share with the students. He noted it was important to bring to their attention that the interstate, while often taken for granted, is the biggest public works project ever undertaken in history.

"I told the students this was a pay-as-you-go project that was almost like a gift from the earlier generations. It had excess capacity and it made our lives better. I challenged them to consider what lies ahead for the 21st century transportation system. Are we going to have as bold of a vision going forward?"

While much more time-consuming than he anticipated, Peters said his experience was well worth the effort.

"This was an opportunity to showcase, at the national level, the importance of the work that transportation professionals do. I had the opportunity to take it to the schools... I think the most rewarding thing was just to see students' interest sparked. They were engaged and asked a lot of questions. It was an opportunity to reach out to our future budding engineers." ♦

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*- Randy Peters
Planning & Project Development Engineer*